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MEMOIRS OF THE AMERICAN FOLK-LORE SOCIETY,
VOL. III.

BAHAMA SONGS AND STORIES.

THE third volume of the *Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society*, to be published about the time of the appearance of this number of the *Journal*, is entitled "Bahama Songs and Stories, a contribution to Folk-Lore by Charles L. Edwards, Ph. D., Professor of Biology in the University of Cincinnati." (With Introduction, Appendix, and Notes; Music, and six Illustrations. Pp. 111.) Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston and New York, 1895.

Of the physical characteristics of the Bahamas it is likely that the majority of the readers of this *Journal* have a very indefinite conception. These include over three thousand islands, mostly of small extent; separated by small distances, they present an appearance nearly uniform, having the aspect of low sand-bars, relieved by the deep green of the vegetation. There is a main island, between which and its surrounding "cays" lies a generally navigable channel, affording an excellent roadstead. The white population is in part descended from families of American loyalists, who here took refuge in the time of the Revolution, while in other cases the colonists emigrated directly from Great Britain. These settlers have grown in number by natural increase, and the result is a number of communities closely related by intermarriage. At present there is nearly a numerical equality between the white and colored population; but the excess of negroes is annually increasing. The writer remarks that an idea of the appearance of a town on one of the "out islands" can be obtained by imagining a seacoast town in North Carolina transported to a small coral island.

The majority of the negroes are descended from imported Africans, and there are individuals who declare themselves to have been born on that continent.

Piety is predominant, and the social life centres in the church. The colored people, who are partially educated, are unusually independent, and a remarkable degree of race equality prevails, churches and schools being occupied in common.

Folk-tales are popular among the children, and are indeed preserved chiefly by their agency. "After the short twilight," the little "Conchs" (native Bahamans) lie on the floor of the hut and listen to one of the group "talk old stories." Professor Edwards remarks that the isolation of the "out" islands from foreign influences and amusements have given good conditions for the development of a peculiar folk-lore. The animal tales are generally of

African origin, the fairy stories European ; in some cases the latter have been metamorphosed into the character of the former, as when Jack the Giant-Killer has become "B' Jack and the Snake." In like manner, the speech is an admixture of negro dialect, "Conch" slang, and correct English. As an example may here be cited a paragraph from the tale of "B' Rabby and B' Tar-Baby ;" a version belonging to the Southern States is well-known through the stories of Uncle Remus.

In this tale the animals, wishing to dig a well, ask the aid of Brother Rabbit ; when the latter declines, they refuse to let him have water. Rabbit, however, deceives the animals who are successively appointed guardians of the well, challenging them to trials of strength or skill, under cover of which he fills his bucket. The elephant undertakes to catch the intruder ; he makes a "tar-baby" (apparently in the shape of a pretty girl) ; Rabbit is enamored of the supposed maiden.

Dey *gone* ; hall on 'em in de pine yard. Dey make one big tar-baby. Dey stick 'im up to de vwell. B' Rabby *come*. 'E say, "Hun ! dey leave my dear home to min' de vwell to-day." B' Rabby say, "Come, my dear, le' me kiss you !" Soon as 'e kiss 'er 'e lip stick fas'. B' Rabby say, "Min' you better le' go ;" 'e say, "You see dis biggy, biggy han' here ;" 'e say, "'f I slap you wid dat I kill you." Now vw'en B' Rabby fire, *so*, 'e han' stick. B' Rabby say, "Min' you better le' go me ;" 'e say, "You see dis biggy, biggy han' here ; 'f I slap you wid dat I kill you." Soon as B' Rabby slap wid de hudder han', *so*, 'e stick. B' Rabby say, "You see dis biggy, biggy foot here : my pa say, 'f I kick anybody wid my biggy, biggy foot I kill 'em." Soon as 'e fire his foot, *so*, it stick. B' Rabby say, "Min' you better le' go me." *Good !* soon as 'e fire his foot, *so*, it stick. Now B' Rabby jus' vvas hangin' ; hangin' on de Tar-baby.

The most interesting feature of this volume will generally be considered to consist in its collection of songs, of which forty are given, with words and music. Of these melodies many are exceedingly beautiful, and will be found a welcome addition to the limited printed stock of genuine negro songs ; either directly or in the guise of adaptations they are likely to attain popularity, and this feature alone would make the work creditable both to the collector and to the Society which issues the publication. In addition to these pieces, a number of short melodies are noted in connection with the songs to which they belong.

The interest attaching to negro music depends partly on its melodic character, partly on the problem of its derivation. Up to the present time, sufficient record has not been made to pronounce on either of these questions. When the genuine negro music of America is properly collected, it will be found that it is to a certain

degree spontaneous, arising out of the strong religious emotion, or other feeling, which gives birth to the expression ; every gradation will be seen to exist, from simple speech onwards, and the whole process of the growth of poetry and of melody will be illustrated in negro folk-song. The denial of such spontaneity rests on ignorance. It does not of course follow that the basis of the musical ideas is absolutely independent of the European music with which negroes have been brought in contact. It may very well be that it is this music which has given birth to a reproduction in the negro mind. It is, however, also quite possible that this process began in West Africa, where for centuries the negro has been in contact with European thought. To pronounce an opinion, with present information would be to attempt the manufacture of bricks without straw.

With respect to an interesting custom Professor Edwards remarks : —

The strangest of all their customs is the service of song held on the night when some friend is supposed to be dying. If the patient does not die, they come again the next night, and between the disease and the hymns the poor negro is pretty sure to succumb. The singers, men, women, and children of all ages, sit about on the floor of the larger room of the hut and stand outside at the doors and windows, while the invalid lies upon the floor in the smaller room. Long into the night they sing their most mournful hymns and "anthems," and only in the light of dawn do those who are left as chief mourners silently disperse. The "anthem" No. 1 (given below) is the most often repeated, and, with all the sad intonation accented by tense emotion of the singers, it sounds in the distance as though it might well be the death triumph of some old African chief ! Each one of the dusky group, as if by intuition, takes some part in the melody, and the blending of all tone-colors in the soprano, tenor, alto, and bass, without reference to the fixed laws of harmony, makes such peculiarly touching music as I have never heard elsewhere. As this song of consolation accompanies the sighs of the dying one, it seems to be taken up by the mournful rustle of the palms, and to be lost only in the undertone of murmur from the distant coral reef. It is all weird and intensely sad.

On the following page is cited the song employed in this service held over the dead : —

I LOOKED O'ER YANDER.



{ I looked o'er yan-der; what I see? Somebod-y's dy-ing ev-'ry day. }
 { See bright an-gels stand-ing dere; Somebod-y's dy-ing ev-'ry day. }

CHORUS.



Ev-'ry day, pas-sin' a-vay, Ev-'ry day, pas-sin' a-vay,



Ev-'ry day, pas-sin' a-vay; Somebody's dy-ing ev-'ry day.

I looked o'er yander; what I see?
 Somebody's dying ev'ry day.
 See bright angels standing dere,
 Somebody's dying ev'ry day. CHO.

Hell is deep, an' dark as 'spair,
 Somebody's dying ev'ry day.
 Stop, O sinne' don' go dere,
 Somebody's dying ev'ry day. CHO.

Satin farred ¹ 'is ball at me,
 Somebody's dying ev'ry day.
 'Is ball had missed an' dropped in hell,
 Somebody's dying ev'ry day. CHO.

I looked on mi han's; mi han's looked new,
 Somebody's dying ev'ry day.
 I looked on mi feet; mi feet looked new,
 Somebody's dying ev'ry day. CHO.

¹ Fired, threw.